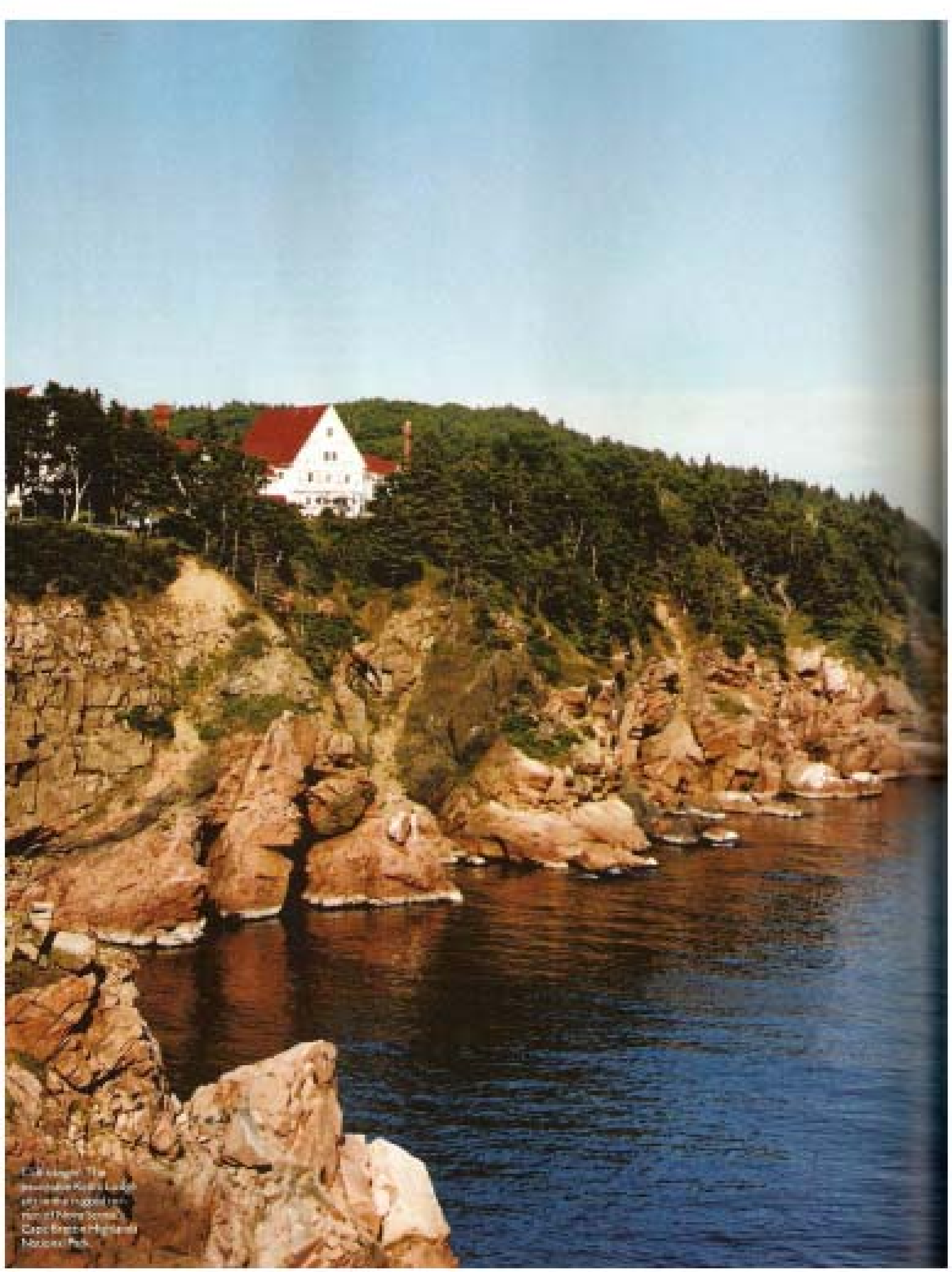
NORTHERN COMPOSURE

WHEN THE SUN **MOVES** HIGH IN THE **SUMMER** SKY, *DAVID RAKOFF* **DRINKS** IN THE REFRESHINGLY **AFFORDABLE** TONIC OF **CANADA'S** MARITIME PROVINCES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
TARA DONNE

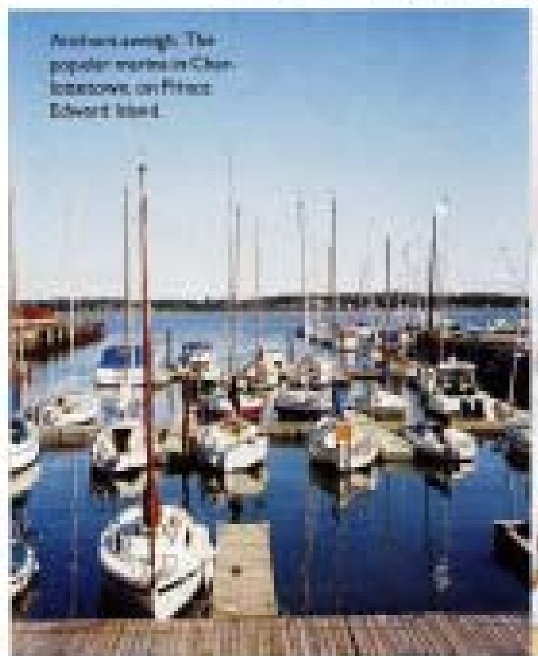


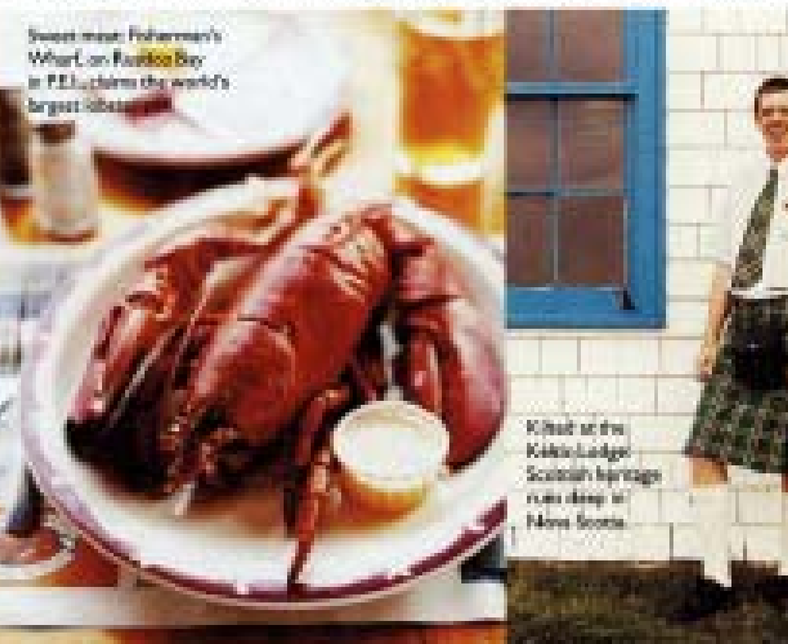
Cliff-hanger: The [illegible] Keltic Lodge sits in the rugged terrain of Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Highlands National Park.

IT WAS A MURDEROUS SUMMER HEAT wave that gripped New York City. The newspapers carried grim stories of people essentially cooked to death in their un-air-conditioned apartments. Con Edison, the power utility, was sending agents door-to-door, begging people to turn off appliances to forestall an inevitable blackout. Al Gore's direst predictions seemed to be coming true. How to escape this inconvenient truth? By getting out of Dodge, of course. But if my Northeastern home was now the climatic equivalent of Atlanta, what did that make New York's local oceanic respites, the Hamptons and the Jersey Shore? The Everglades?

The only solution was to go north. Hoping to avoid the throngs of vacationers who yearly overrun Cape Cod and Maine, I settled on the Canadian Maritimes. I had always wanted to see that part of my native land, my desire based almost entirely on a postcard I had received as a child depicting the lighthouse at Peggy's Cove, Nova Scotia. Possibly the most famous image of Eastern Canada, the bright-white beacon stands alone and proud on the smooth, bare rock, looking out to a gray sea that is cold and huge and cares not one jot for the lives and aspirations of man or beast. My kind of place.

The first leg of my journey on the ground—a two-hour cab ride from Nova Scotia's Sydney airport to Ingonish—is as immediate and welcome a relief as a cool hand on my forehead. I am driven through the misty, rugged Cape Breton Highlands. Unlike, say, Rome, New York, or any other improbably named place (O, whither your white nights, St. Petersburg, Florida?), the Highlands of Nova Scotia, literally New Scotland, really do resemble their namesake, both topographically and spiritually. We cross the Great Bras d'Or inlet, a narrow channel from the Atlantic bordered on both sides by piney banks of forest. It is beautiful and harsh and looks like nothing so much as Loch Ness. We pass signs reading CEAD MILE FAILTE ("one hundred thousand welcomes"), an old Gaelic greeting,


Anchors aweigh: The popular marina in Charlottetown, on Prince Edward Island.


Sweet meat: Fisherman's Wharf, on Rustico Bay in P.E.I., claims the world's largest lobster

Kilted at the Keltic Lodge: Scottish heritage runs deep in Nova Scotia.

just as we come upon the Gaelic College of Celtic Arts and Crafts, an institution devoted to the culture of the original settlers. There in the circular driveway stands a young student playing the bagpipes in full kilted regalia. The winding road up Mount Smokey climbs about eight hundred feet in a mile, the Atlantic stretching out below us. I've said it before—perhaps even in the pages of this magazine—but it's hard to be blasé about an ocean. And there in the distance is my first stop, the Keltic Lodge: red-roofed, Tudor-timbered, perched on its rocky promontory. It is here that I am meeting up with one of my best and oldest friends, Natalia, who now lives in London, along with her husband, Philippe, and their three children. We will be together for five days.

THE LODGE SITS INCONGRUOUS AS A BOWLING GREEN IN THE CONE OF A VOLCANO

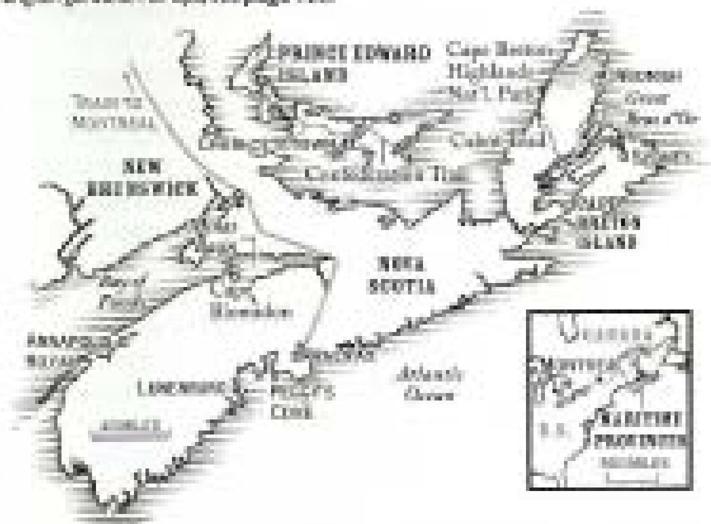
The Keltic Lodge sits incongruous as a bowling green in the cone of a volcano, paradisiacally situated on a peninsula of protected provincial park. The sea roils below on three sides, crashing against rocks that give way to wild forest which climbs the hills. But the grounds of the

hotel itself are sweet formal English flower beds and rolling lawns dotted everywhere with multicolored Adirondack chairs. Opened in 1952, it still has that feel. Indeed, 1952 (in that innocent and retro sense, as opposed to that Red-baiting/duck-and-cover sense) will be the prevailing mood for days to come. A gentle politeness will suffuse every interaction. The Keltic is a Shangri-La of sorts. A reverse Shangri-La, to be precise: The place is peacefully geriatric. Golf culture and its attendant quiet prevail. And while I don't feel anything but completely welcome, the 1952 feeling also savors of a Canada before it became a multicultural haven. I do not see, for example, among the prevalent white hair and ice cream–colored wardrobe, anything resembling the sartorial exuberance of my own fellow Hebrews when they reach a certain age: the Matisse-bright loungewear accompanied by the ethnic clank of hammered silver jewelry purchased on the previous year's trip to San Miguel de Allende.

We get into the Keltic rhythm by doing not much of

PLACES & PRICES
COOL IN CANADA

The Maritime Provinces induce summertime bliss—in pine forests, on sandy beaches, in English gardens. For tips, see **page 168.**



Hot wheels: Ready for Nova Scotia's two-hundred-mile world-class Cabot Trail.

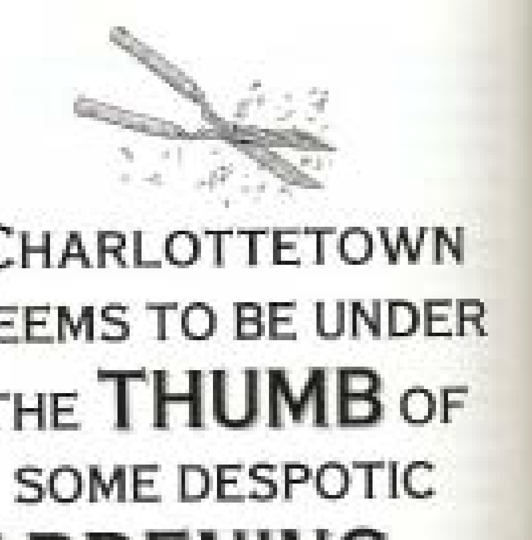
anything really. We walk to a nearby rocky beach, picking and eating raspberries along the way. We have our very good breakfast and supper nightly in the lodge's Purple Thistle Dining Room, with extraordinary views of the Atlantic on both sides, and we spend a fair amount of time sitting in the Adirondack chairs, chatting and taking in the astonishing scenery.

Rousing ourselves one morning, we tag along on a nature hike. We see two varieties of birch and some woodpecker holes in a fallen tree, but I can't really blame the kids when they get a little bored. There's just not that much going on in these woods, and our guide is a less-than-electric docent. We do manage to see a partridge slowly making its way through the underbrush, but Philippe and I peel off with the girls down to a rocky outcropping where we can at least watch the waves come in. And there, finally, wildlife! A school of jellyfish. (Does one say a "school"? Isn't their presence in multiples merely a function of currents? Can they be said to have social cohesion any more than one would describe the dozens of insects flattened on a car's windshield as a community?) The jellyfish are a very pretty dark bluey-purple. We skim one out of the water and bring it up on the rocks to get a closer look. While it's floating in water, we can see the flowerlike opening and closing of its body. But here on dry land, glistening in the soon-to-prove-lethal sun, it is a formless and shuddering pile of violet gelatin, absent of structure.

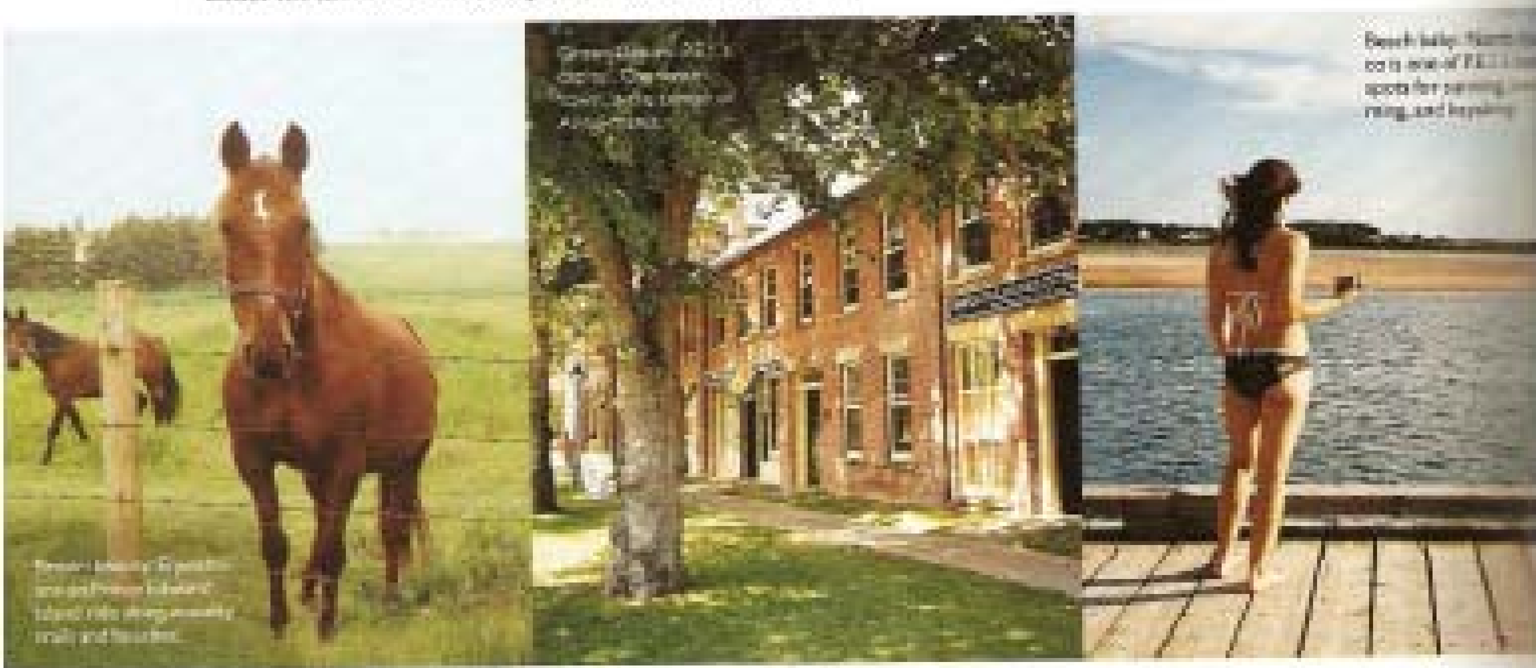
THE IRONY IS NOT LOST ON ME THAT FINDING refuge on this roasting planet requires that I blithely increase my carbon footprint by hopping on a gas-guzzling airplane (two of them, actually: I had to change in Montreal) and, once here, further engage in that most traditional of fossil-fuel bacchanals: the driving holiday—and me a nondriver. My guilt is assuaged somewhat by the fact that the Maritimes are almost completely unserved by trains, except for one—about which more later—and that I am just one of six sharing a barely midsize vehicle. It is

all very jolly in the backseat with the three children, who take up little room and are excellent company; but after an hour, the delusional monsters start complaining about the size of my backside.

Our Maritimes trip will describe an exaggerated circumflex that will take us from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, to Prince Edward Island, and back to the mainland of Nova Scotia to Halifax. We leave the Keltic one morning and are driving off the car ferry onto Prince Edward Island by that afternoon. The lodge and its environs seem a distant dream. Maybe that's because the evergreen wilderness of Cape Breton stands in such distinct contrast to the flat patchwork of Prince Edward Island's fields. We drive past immaculate clapboard houses and small white churches, through towns with the most starchy Anglo names: Roseberry, Cardigan, and Point Prim. It might all be called Point Prim, given the pin-neatness of the landscape. Even Charlottetown, P.E.I.'s capital, seems to be under the thumb of some despotic, flower-hatted garden-



CHARLOTTETOWN SEEMS TO BE UNDER THE THUMB OF SOME DESPOTIC GARDENING CLUB



ing club. Its many small green squares are lovingly planted and maintained. Large shade trees line streets of restored old mansions—some once again private homes, some that house social services, clearly predating the area's revival, and some converted into B&Bs, like the Hillhurst, where we are staying.

At our breakfast table the next morning, we are joined by the inn's other guests: five grown women from Utah, Mormon sisters and sisters-in-law. They have left their many children back at home with their husbands. All very nice and chatty, Natalia asks what brought them here to P.E.I.

"Anne," one of them answers simply.

Ah, yes, Anne of Green Gables, the Lucy Maud Montgomery heroine who put P.E.I. on the map and has inspired mad global devotion. But in our little group, I, the only Canadian, don't care. Natalia and Philippe didn't grow up with the books, and the children don't know them either, so we count ourselves uniquely lucky in our imperviousness to the ubiquitous merch.

It might seem that visiting P.E.I. in the summer and not driving to the mock Anne of Avonlea village up in Cavendish, or seeing at least one of the two Anne-themed musicals playing simultaneously in Charlottetown, is like visiting Mecca during the hajj, but for the ceramics. Still, there is much here to delight the general traveler. We stroll along streets of restored nineteenth-century buildings, past outdoor jazz trios and ice cream parlors. It is both languorous and decorous. A beach town in white gloves. In a gift shop, I find the first in the line of Canadian Legends action figures: John A. Macdonald, the first prime minister. There he is in his dark frock coat, with his fearsome swivel table and two Chiclet-sized leather-bound volumes at the ready. *Biff! Pow!* Take that, foes of post-colonial representative parliamentary democracy!

In truth, there is no more fitting superhero for this place. Here is where the first talk of confederating the British North American colonies into present-day Canada began. In Province House, a lovely neoclassical building

we watch *A Great Dream*, a video about how this all came about. It seems there was a conference, and a lunch, and a ball, and some more talking. Just as I remember from my own Canadian childhood, our history is almost parodically uneventful. Then again, a country born of conversation might make for some dull classroom hours but seems a fair exchange for fewer burial grounds filled with eighteen-year-old boys.

In a nearby outdoor amphitheater, we watch a more exciting, musical-theater version of How We Got Here. First up: the natives, played by cute, muscular dancer boys—all Caucasian—in fringed chaps (with what look to be fetching suede Speedos underneath). They jump through feathered hoops with acrobatic grace, punctuating each routine with a very un-Ojibway-sounding "Oy!" Suddenly!—through the audience he comes. A drifter, drifting. He wears full-body buckskin, the traditional costume of a trapper, those fur traders who settled the New World. He sings an anthem to all souls who have ever left their homes in search of a better place—like a Broadway theater, for example. "What will I find in this newfound land?" he wonders. Time marches—and jetés—on, and here come the resolute men of the railroad "living on stew and drinkin' bad whiskey." Now a barn-raising dance, à la *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (minus the uncomfortable associations to *The Rape of the Sabine Women*). It is all energetic and well-danced and sweet. There are towheaded children in the audience waving little Canadian flags! Like I said, 1952.

"EACH MAN STOOD AT HIS POST / WHILE ALL the weaker ones went by, / and showed once more to all the world / how Englishmen should die," reads the headstone for Everett Edward Elliott, age twenty-four. At Philippe's insistence, our first stop in Halifax, before we even get to our hotel, is the Fairview Lawn Cemetery. It is here where 121 of the roughly 1,500 victims of the *Titanic* disaster are buried. The very modest black granite stones were provided by the White Star Line. The word *Titanic* was only carved onto the stones after the success of the movie, but the sinking of the great liner has always been one of the nautical disasters imbedded in the collective memory of Halifax. The other was an explosion in the harbor in 1917, when a munitions ship crashed into another vessel and blew up, killing 2,000 people and destroying much of what is now the north end of the city. I know a couple who were flying back to New York from Paris on 9/11. Their flight was rerouted to Halifax, where they were put up by a volunteer family for days. When one of my friends wondered aloud at the extraordinary and unquestioning kindness they were being shown, their hosts mentioned how it was the very least they could do considering how helpful the Americans had apparently been.

That a Haligonian would regard events which had taken place nine decades earlier as a potent pretext to do someone else a good turn doesn't seem surprising after spending as little as twenty-four *(Continued on page 184)*

THE OYSTERS ARE SO FAT AND **BRINY** YOU WANT TO MARRY THE **SHUCKER** OR CRY, OR BOTH

Canadian Maritimes

(Continued from page 153)

hours in the Maritimes. I cannot say this too emphatically: The people of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island—or everyone I encountered over eleven days, at any rate—are among the kindest and friendliest I have ever met. Forget the achingly pretty towns, the ocean vistas, or the oysters and mussels so fat and briny you want to marry the shucker or cry, or both: it is the people who are reason enough to go there on holiday. Every interaction, whether getting my morning coffee or searching for children's car sickness lozenges, is like having my heart massaged.

And Halifax is lovely! The streets slope steeply down to the water. The worn cobbles of the Historic Properties—an area of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings that now house the Granville campus of the world-class Nova Scotia College of Art and Design—suggest Paris. We walk along the waterfront, passing runty, muscular tugboats, those most anthropomorphic and sympathetic of vessels. There is a small island in the harbor, a rolling green hill with a lighthouse and two smaller buildings. Like many a prospect in the Maritimes, it seems toy-scale. We look at the sea stars collected near the pilings of the pier, we gorge ourselves on the free samples of rum cake in a shop and look in waterfront store windows. There are some very snazzy condominiums nearby with what must be astonishing views. Walking up the hill past the stately stone building where the farmers' market happens each Saturday, Philippe observes, "It's quite gentrified here."

"What's gentrified?" asks eleven-year-old Leo.

"Poshed up," his dad explains.

Leo thinks about it for a moment. "Oh. I like things that are gentrified, apparently."

IN *THE CHILDREN*, THE EDITH Wharton novel I have coincidentally been reading on the trip, Martin Boyne, a single traveler in Europe who becomes the unwitting guardian of a roistering bunch of kids, finds himself to have "been gradually penetrated by the warm animal life which proceeds from a troop of happy healthy children." That's exactly right. It is with great reluctance that I say goodbye to Natalia, Philippe, and the kids the next morning. But I have decided to spend some time alone in Halifax before heading off elsewhere in Nova Scotia, including—finally—to the place that brought me here: Peggy's Cove. That, at least, is a thought that pleases.

And a bonus: I will not be bereft of youthful energy for very long either. I have booked two days with Salty Bear Adventure Travel, an outfit that organizes driving tours through the province. Trolling its Web site, I see that I am a good deal older than its average customer. Indeed, this will turn out to be very, very true. There are thirteen of us on board the Salty Bear van. There are young men and women, early twenties, from Scotland, Ireland, Australia, England, Germany, and Canada. Plus Chris Penton, thirty-two, our driver and until recently the co-owner of Salty Bear. Originally from Ottawa, Chris has something of the blue-eyed, verbal quickness of the actor Matthew Perry about him. He kicks things off with an icebreaker: Who are you? Where are you from? And whom would you like to see naked? I haven't heard of easily half of the physical paragons the others invoke. I beg off. I have to spend two days with these striplings, and I am loath to scare them by responding with the only logical answer, really, given their taut poreless skin and the keening Doppler of their racing, turbocharged metabolisms virtually ringing in my ears: "Every single one of you."

In truth, over the course of the trip, they will seem less a monolithic storehouse of collagen and will separate out into a disparate group of some very charming individuals. But in this initial blush, I feel old, old, old. One of them passes around her iPod, inviting the rest of us to bestow upon its storehouse any of our own particular MP3 favorites. She hooks it up to the van's sound system. Scissor Sisters pours out of the speakers, and we are off. Quite an acceleration, from 1952 to the present in under four seconds.

The landscape of my childhood postcard starts only about three hundred yards from Peggy's Cove itself. It is an abrupt change from forest to gently rolling earth with low ground cover, scattered with boulders that seem as though they've been dropped from the sky. The fishing village is ridiculously picturesque, with clapboard houses nestled among the famous rocks. There are signs advising us not to stray too close to the water's edge or onto any darker

(read: wet) rocks. Someone gets swept out to sea every year, we are told. But the water is placid today. The lighthouse glows against the clear blue of the sky. Even with the hundred or so tourists here at this moment, it doesn't feel crowded. The bare, rocky expanse is big and austere, affording each of us our contemplative space. We amble over the boulders, each lost in our isolation, a musical version of that last extended sequence in Antonioni's *L'Avventura*. It is everything I'd hoped for, if not a tad upbeat.

But for cheerfulness, nothing is as warming as the town of Lunenburg. In centuries past, it was a global center of shipbuilding. In its preindustrial form, it was an endeavor that involved lots of photogenic he-man arts and crafts: much hewing and bending of majestic trees into the upended cathedral skeletons of schooners; mutton-chopped stevedores and dignitaries staring out from ship-christening tintypes. Lunenburg's Old Town, with its historic waterfront, has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This means that it is inviolate, inalterable. (It's worth remembering that the Buddhas of Bamiyan were also a World Heritage Site. Fat lot of good that did.) We overshoot the town and drive out to the nearby golf course across the bay in order to get a proper view of it all. It is an adorable Legoland of buildings painted whatever color the fishermen had left over from painting their boats: scarlet, buttercream, slate blue, mint green. Chris says that it can be bleak and deserted in winter, but in high summer, there are hundreds of us visitors thronging the streets and milling about in the many shops. Surely UNESCO must have some sort of intervening policing power to countervail the town's surfeit of fudge.

Lunenburg's perfection brings up the more global question of how to preserve the authenticity of the past without descending into ersatz preciousness. Peggy's Cove, on the other hand, is still a working fishing village, and the houses of its few residents do not appear to have been upgraded, but I hope they're all millionaires. It seems a lot to ask of people, that they continue to live in their photogenic privation, while the souvenir concession not thirty yards away rakes in the bucks.

There is less of a quandary when the attraction is naturally occurring. The Bay of Fundy has the highest tides in the world. Over the course of the roughly twelve-hour cycle, the water level can vary by as much as fifty-two feet. According to a pamphlet in a local tourist information center, the billion tons of seawater that flow into Minas Basin twice daily actually tilts the surrounding countryside slightly. We get to Cape Blomidon, our lookout point, while the tide is out, but it has been coming in for an hour, says a man in the parking lot. Even so, there is a vast flat of exposed ocean floor before us. We walk out on the packed red sand rilled with the pattern of the waves. We walk for a good half mile before we reach the sea.

Finally, at the water's edge, I realize that the sea has been traveling back to meet us all this time, and at a real clip, almost the speed of walking. But the water's arrival is a subtler process. First, the ground beneath our feet begins to give just a little. Then, the shade of the red sand morphs along with its softening texture, going from a matte brick to vaguely lustrous, and a few seconds later it is downright shiny. Just as you register this final transformation, the water rushes over your sneakers. Tides are not waves. Fundy is not dramatic in a *Hawaii Five-O* opening credits, Hokusai wood-block print kind of way, but it is an astonishment just the same for the sheer size of the phenomenon. A global impact made manifest. There are a great many Mennonites visiting here as well. Fundy is a real Mennonite tourist destination, according to Chris. They are wearing ankle-length dresses in flowered cotton, their hair pinned back and adorned with small swatches of stiff black fabric—something between a bonnet and a kerchief. Their unadorned, anachronistic simplicity is the perfect complement to this huge minimalist landscape, with its horizontal bands of color: blue sky, green slope, red beach, gray water. My inner art director kicks in immediately. I am not proud that I regard them as props, but I cannot stop myself from pronouncing, albeit silently, "These Mennonites are fabulous!"

UNABLE TO FACE THE HEAT OF New York (or New Yorkers) just yet, I prolong my return by booking a sleeper on *The Ocean*, the overnight train that will take me from Halifax to Montreal. The price of my ticket includes a cunning fold-down bed in a modest private compartment and some slightly-better-than-airplane meals in the dining car. None of it is anything that could be described as plush. The finishes and surfaces are not fancy, but they are clean if a little chipped and worn here and there. It isn't the *Rovos Rail* or the *Orient Express*, but here's what it also isn't: Amtrak! Moreover, *The Ocean* prides itself on being educational and experiential. There is even a Learning Coordinator, a friendly Francophone woman named Lyne. We can go to the globe car, a double-decker railcar at the back end of the train, and Lyne will be there if we have any questions about the history of the areas we will be passing through.

It is an overcast dusk. There are no stars for the glass roof of the globe car to [illegible] case, but it's very nice to sit on the upper deck watching the land zip by. Up in the front seat is a man, about sixty-five, wearing a polo shirt with the words [illegible] SOCIETY OF NEWFOUNDLAND printed over the breast, having the time of his life. One of the other passengers asks in French what kind of birds we saw flocked on the telephone wires as we cross over the Miramichi River. I allow as how I think they are cormorants (I guess at the words). Thus begins a long three-way conversation with Lyne in French, with me just barely keeping up. This gradual transition from English to French, the two main European cultures that make up Canada, is like the mixing of salt water with fresh in an estuary. Nova Scotia started out French, although that's now more a matter of sentiment than of fact. The Acadians ended up down in Louisiana, where their own dialect shortened their name to Cajuns. In the present, we almost couldn't drive by a church or a community hall that didn't have a sign out front for the local ceilidh, the Irish-Scottish musical gathering. Now the train is in New Brunswick, which boasts a Celtic history as well as a large Francophone population. Lyne points this out to us and also shows us how she changed her foulard when we crossed over into this province. She is wearing the New Brunswick plaid. There is no designated Quebecois tartan for her to put on when we cross that border. Besides, it will be the middle of the night when we do.

The Outback

(Continued from page [illegible])

soup. I make it myself!"

And what a cozy night it ends up being, for at the Family Hotel we are already regulars. Skinny Karen greets me with a Cooper's: "There you go, darlin'." I say hello to Tony, the guy from Victoria who [illegible] ing buying the hotel; to Wayne and [illegible] the gas-field workers we met [illegible] the roads; to Alex, the Mohawk [illegible] back last night, who [illegible] School of the Air; to Kate, the [illegible] bartender; to Robert, the [illegible] man who looks like a [illegible] boy whose palaver I cannot [illegible] the grizzled mate who sits alone [illegible]